

gliding down the hall, a dark shadow closing on Corbin.

Corbin never had a chance. His back was turned to approaching Fate. In nine graceful, ballerina strides, the panther covered nearly the full length of the hall. I could not help but marvel at the elegant efficiency of its lethal approach. A full ten meters from Corbin, the panther sprang, extending its razor sharp claws, landing a moment later with its full weight on Corbin's unprotected back.

*My god, Brena; I can still see it clearly as if it were happening this very moment.*

Corbin must have had his breath knocked out of him, for he made scarcely a sound when he dropped to the floor. Merciless in his mauling, the outcome of the brief struggle was determined in an instant.

Corbin had no chance, so I turned my eyes immediately away from the gruesome scene to Kira, who had her back pressed against the far side of the hall, up against the image of Polyhymnia. She was in shock, so I shouted for her to run, run while the panther was still occupied.

My urgent pleas snapped Kira out from her shocked immobility, and she regained her composure just in time to dart past the engaged panther. Neither Kira nor I ever even considered intervening in the struggle, for after witnessing the power, agility, and ferocity of that panther we knew it would be suicide to even try. The best that we could do at that point was try and save ourselves.

Kira, terrified out of her mind, ran right past me, out into the entry chamber, without a word. I was strongly tempted to follow suit, but when I glanced back at the panther, I saw that it had finished with Corbin, and was crouching to spring after the fleeing Kira. The site was gruesome; the panther's front legs, paws, face, and teeth were doused in dull dripping blood, glowing ominously under the fungus light. Corbin was a lifeless mess at its feet.

A wave of furious anger made my thoughts turn red, red as the blood which lay testament to the panther's wicked nature. I was filled with an animal

fury, born of the need for self-preservation and revenge.

The panther sprang, and within a few strides had reached top speed. Its emerald eyes were locked on Kira, just now passing me on my right. I knew if I didn't block its path, the panther would overtake Kira before she could reach the relative safety of the upper entrance tunnel. So, without thinking, perhaps as a small token of atonement for the death of Corbin, I blocked the entrance to the hall with my body. The panther was not going to get past without going through me. I knew I had no chance of prevailing against that lissome beast, but perhaps my death would provide Kira the few extra moments she needed to climb up out of the entry chamber to safety.

*So this is how it ends, I thought, as the panther bore down upon me in slow motion, a miraculously graceful shadow shedding light upon the frailty and clumsiness of the human form. The panther crouched and leapt mid-stride, literally gliding on air. I tensed, preparing for the muscular weight with might mercifully knock me numb into the eternal blackness.*

But in the dim light I must have misjudged the distance between us, for the panther came up short, landing on all fours ten meters in front of me. Its posture rigid, the panther slid on all fours, coming to a stop directly in front of me, its nose touching my chest. I reached up to strike the beast, but at the final moment I held back, for when I glared down into those wide emerald orbs, I recognized the love of a dog for its master.

The fury I felt at Corbin's death was so intense that I trembled, longing to strike that wicked beast, *strike it again and again and again*, beat the spark of life out of those eyes with my bare hands. But in the end, I could not bring myself to vent my rage upon the loving creature at my feet. Red rage fled from me as quickly as it had arrived, replaced by an eminently more rational fear of the powerful panther at my heels.

When I dropped my arm to my side, the panther leapt up unexpectedly onto its hind legs, balancing itself with its paws pressed against my chest. I